

Should the Electoral College Be Abolished?

Several years after the United States was founded, the Constitutional Convention met to decide how the new nation would govern itself. Government had been based on the Articles of Confederation, which had virtually no executive branch—that is, no single leader, such as the president. It was clear that such a leader was necessary. The Convention created the offices of president and vice president. But the delegates bitterly remembered how Britain had abused its power when it ruled the American colonies. They knew the leader's power needed limits. They also knew that the leader must be chosen in an informed process that would consider the wishes of every citizen without giving too much weight to any one group.

In general, the delegates did not believe the president and vice president should be chosen by a **direct popular vote** of the people. They did not trust that voters would have enough information to make a good choice. Instead, the delegates settled on a system involving an **Electoral College**. In this

system, the president and vice president are chosen indirectly. The Electoral College system works like this:

- All states and the District of Columbia get one electoral vote for each of their US senators and representatives. For example, California, the most populous state, has 53 members in the House of Representatives and 2 senators, so it has 55 electoral votes.

- Each state has a **slate of electors** for each presidential candidate. When citizens vote in the presidential election, they are really voting for the slate of electors.

- In 48 states and the District of Columbia, whichever candidate wins the most votes in the state wins the state's electoral votes. This is called the **winner-take-all** method.

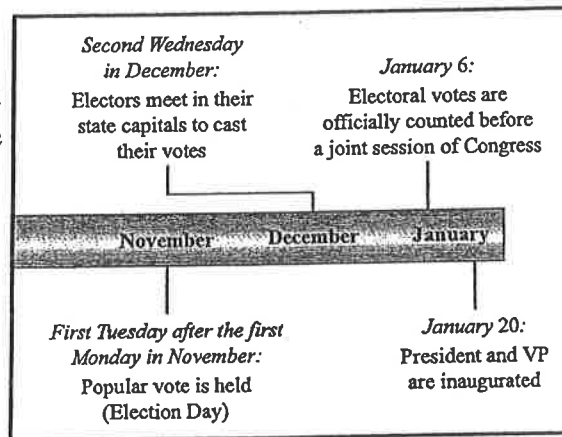
- A candidate must receive a majority (one more than half) of the electoral votes to be declared president. If no one obtains a **majority**, the US House of Representatives selects the president from the top three contenders. In that case, each state gets one vote.

There are no set qualifications for being an elector. Members of Congress and certain other federal officeholders are not allowed to be electors. The Constitution lets state legislatures decide how the electors are chosen. In many states, the legislature leaves the decision up to the political parties or the candidates themselves. The political parties use the job of elector as a reward for important people in the party.

Following the popular vote, the electors cast their votes, one for president and one for vice-president. Electors are required to cast at least one of these votes for someone from outside their state. Since electors are chosen by the political parties, they are usually loyal to their party in their votes.

As with many compromises, the Electoral College solution leaves many people unhappy. Some people believe the Electoral College system undercuts the basic principle of representative government—that one person should have one vote. Other people believe that, like many other legacies of the founders, the Electoral College may be flawed, but it's still the best system for our democracy.

Is the Electoral College a good system for electing the president and vice president in the 21st century? Some people think it is still a workable approach for our federal system. Others think it is undemocratic and should be abolished or changed. Read the documents and decide: *Should the Electoral College be abolished?*



Background Essay Questions

1. Why do you think delegates to the Constitutional Convention might have had a difficult time deciding how to choose the president and vice president?
2. How did the Electoral College help to overcome the delegates' concerns about uninformed voters?
3. How many electors does each state have? How does that help the small states?
4. According to the time line, when is the President of the United States really chosen?
5. What happens if no one gets a majority of the electoral votes?
6. Define these terms:

direct popular vote

Electoral College

slate

electors

winner-take-all

majority

Timeline

- 1787 – Constitutional Convention approves Electoral College system.
- 1788 – Constitution ratified.
- 1800 – Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr tie in the Electoral College. The election is decided in the House of Representatives.
- 1824 – Election decided by House of Representatives. John Quincy Adams, who was second in the popular vote, elected.
- 1860 – Abraham Lincoln wins less than 40 percent of the popular vote but wins in the Electoral College.
- 1876 – Rutherford B. Hayes loses the popular vote but wins the electoral vote.
- 1888 – Benjamin Harrison loses the popular vote but wins the electoral vote.
- 2000 – George W. Bush loses the popular vote but wins the electoral vote.

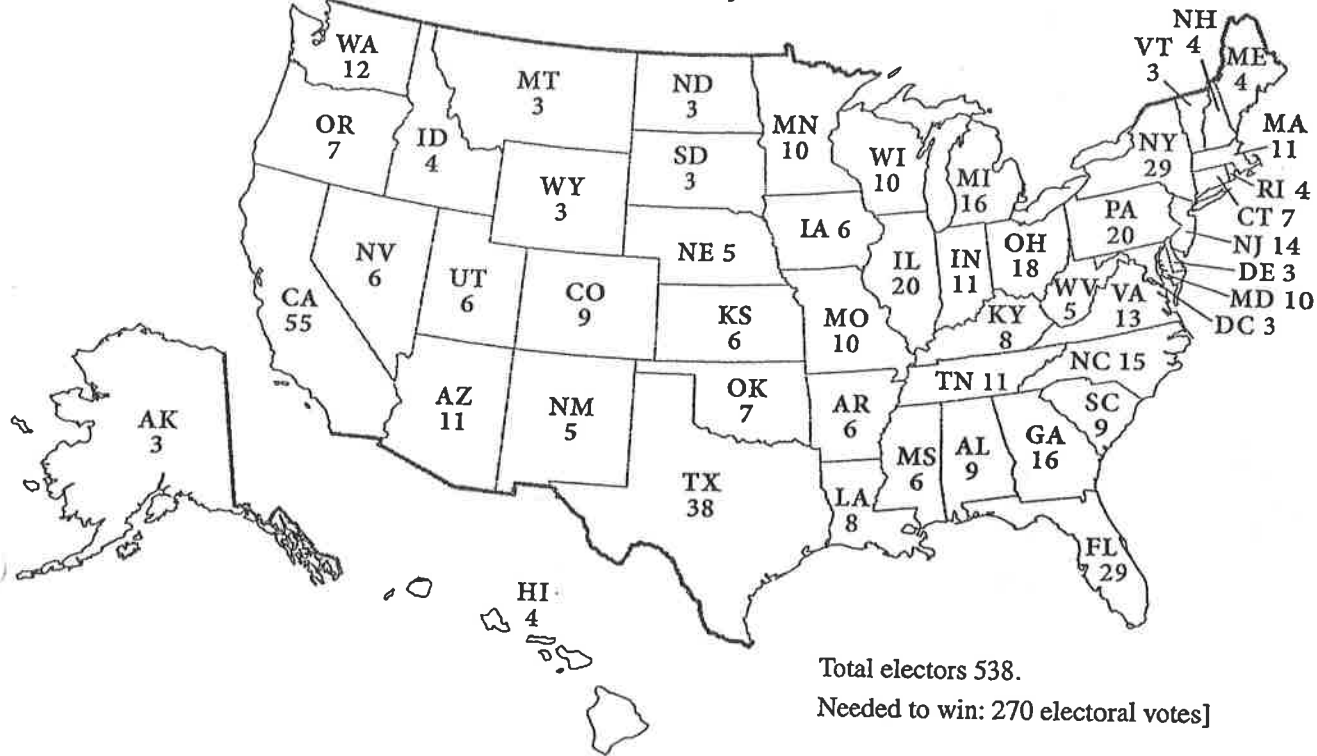
Document A

Source: Map created from various sources, 2012.

Note: The number of electoral votes per state is apportioned (distributed) every ten years based on the results of the US Census. A state's number of electors is tied to its number of Congressional representatives: one for each senator and one for each member of the House. Therefore, the changing population affects not only representation but also how many electoral votes a state has. A state can never have fewer than three electors.

EV

Electoral Votes by State



Document Analysis

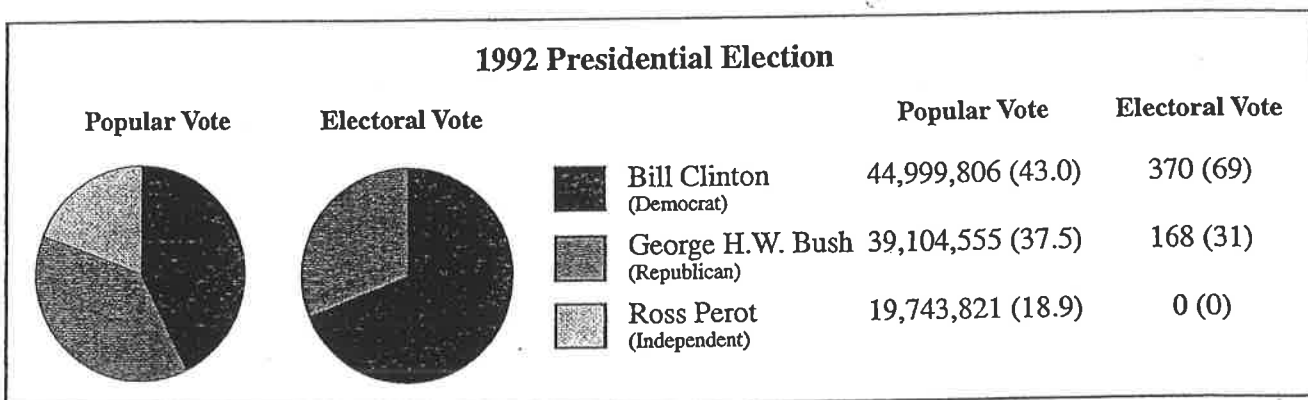
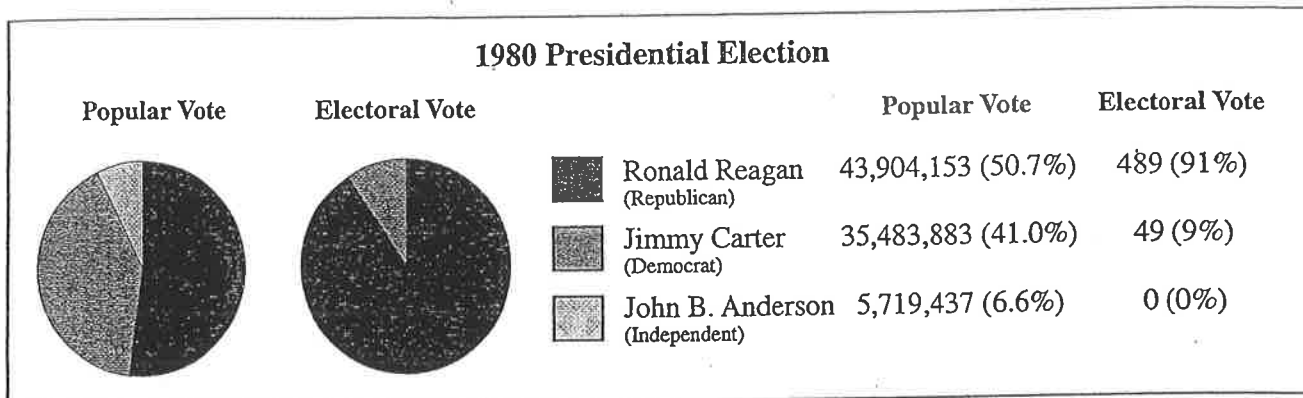
1. Which two states have the most electoral votes? How many do they have?
2. What is the fewest number of electoral votes any state has? Why is this the smallest number any state can have?
3. Find your state on the map. How many electoral votes does your state have?
4. Draw a line across the center of your map horizontally. Draw another line across the center of your map vertically. You have created four large regions of the United States. Could a candidate win if he/she had no support in any one of these regions? Explain.

What is the smallest number of states a candidate could win and win the Electoral College? Remember, you need 270 votes to win.

How could this document help support abolishing or keeping the Electoral College?

Document B

Source: Various sources.



Document Analysis

1. What percentage of the popular vote did Reagan win in 1980? Carter? Anderson? What percentage of the electoral vote did each candidate win?
2. What percentage of the popular vote did Clinton receive in 1992? Bush? Perot? What percentage of the electoral vote did each candidate win?
3. How would you describe the results of the popular vote in these two elections? How would you describe the results of the electoral vote in these two elections?
4. What effect does the Electoral College seem to have on the chances of a third-party or independent candidate?
5. What benefit might having a larger Electoral College majority give the person who wins the election?
6. How could this document help you argue for or against the Electoral College being abolished?

Document C

Source: John Samples, "In Defense of the Electoral College," Cato Institute, November 10, 2000.

...the Electoral College makes sure that the states count in presidential elections. As such, it is an important part of our federalist system—a system worth preserving. Historically, federalism [the combination of a central government with some authority given to state and local governments] is central to our grand constitutional effort to restrain power.



Source: Mitch McConnell, from "Introduction" in *Securing Democracy: Why We Have an Electoral College*, edited by Gary L. Gregg II, 2008.

Is the Electoral College method of presidential selection the easiest to understand or the most efficient in its execution? No. But our system is not designed to be simple and efficient. It is designed to promote good government and legislation that forwards the common good of a large and diverse nation. For two centuries it has done a pretty good job at that. Every day when I walk into my Senate office, I am thankful for the complexities and inefficiencies that have contributed to the freedom and prosperity we know in America. Though it may never have functioned as intended, the Electoral College has been the linchpin of American political prosperity. It has formed our political parties, moderated our more extreme elements, and forged the presidential campaigns that have given direction to our ship of state.

Document Analysis

Does John Samples believe that government power should be increased or limited?

John Samples says that the Electoral College helps preserve the federalist structure of our government.

What is a federalist structure? In Samples's view, how does the Electoral College help preserve it?

Why does Mitch McConnell believe the inefficiency of elections is actually a positive thing?

Compare and contrast Samples's and McConnell's views about the Electoral College.

How could this document help you argue for keeping the Electoral College?

Document D

Source: George C. Edwards, *Why the Electoral College Is Bad for America*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004.

The Electoral College violates political equality. It is not a neutral counting device....
(It favors some citizens over others, depending solely upon the state in which voters cast their votes for president. . . .



Source: Chart created from various sources.

State	Population	Electoral Votes
Alaska	710,231	3
Delaware	897,934	3
District of Columbia	601,723	3
Hawaii	1,360,301	4
Idaho	1,567,582	4
Maine	1,328,361	4
Montana	989,415	3
North Dakota	672,591	3
New Hampshire	1,316,470	4
Rhode Island	1,052,567	4
South Dakota	814,180	3
Vermont	625,741	3
Wyoming	563,626	3
12 States + DC total	12,500,722	44
Illinois	12,830,632	20

Argument Analysis

What political principle does George Edwards say the Electoral College violates? How, according to Edwards, does it violate that principle?

Which has the larger population – Illinois or the other 12 states listed in the chart and the District of Columbia combined? Which has more electoral votes?

How does the chart illustrate Edwards's point about political equality?

How could you use this document to argue that the Electoral College be abolished?

Document E

Note: The United States has historically had a two-party system. This means that there are only two major political parties. These are the parties that contend for and almost always win political office. Some other democracies have multi-party systems, where there are many more parties with a real chance of winning office.

Source: Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Electoral College Debate: Election 2000: It's a Mess, But We've Been Through It Before," *Time*, November 20, 2000.



The abolition of state-by-state, winner-take-all electoral votes would speed the disintegration [falling apart] of the already weakened two-party system. It would encourage single-issue ideologues* and eccentric millionaires to jump into presidential contests. The multiplication of splinter parties** would make it hard for major-party candidates to win popular-vote majorities.

*ideologues: People who blindly support a particular idea or set of ideas

**splinter parties: Small parties with ideas outside the mainstream

Source: George Will, "Cheers for the Electoral College," *The Baltimore Sun*, April 19, 1992.

Even when the popular vote margin is wafer-thin, the winner-take-all electoral vote allocation tends to produce a winning margin that looks like national decisiveness. . . . (T)he system bolsters the two-party system by discouraging independent candidacies that splinter the electorate. It generates moderate mandates for parties that seek a broad consensus through [alliances] and accommodations.

Document Analysis

1. What does Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. say would happen if the Electoral College were abolished? Why does he think that is a problem?
2. What does George Will mean when he says independent candidates could "splinter the electorate"? Why would this be important?
3. Will says that the electoral vote produces a result that looks like "national decisiveness." Why might the appearance of decisiveness be important?
4. Schlesinger and Will both mention "splinter" parties and candidates. How does each writer feel about such candidates? Compare their views.
5. How could this document be used to support keeping the Electoral College?

Document F

Source: Bradford Plumer, "The Indefensible Electoral College," *Mother Jones*, October 8, 2004.

Perhaps most worrying is the prospect of a tie in the electoral vote. In that case, the election would be thrown to the House of Representatives, where state delegations vote on the president. (The Senate would choose the vice-president.) Because each state casts only one vote, the single representative from Wyoming, representing 500,000 voters, would have as much say as the 55 representatives from California, who represent 35 million voters.

EV

Document Analysis

1. What is Plumer's concern about a tie in the Electoral College? Why does he think this would be a bad outcome?
2. Plumer provides numbers to support his argument. How do these numbers show inequality?
3. How do you think voters would respond if the House of Representatives were to decide the outcome of a presidential election?
4. How could this document help you argue for abolishing the Electoral College?

Document G

Source: Various Sources.

	Candidate	Popular Vote	Electoral Vote
1824	Adams	113,122	84 (winner)
	Clay	47,531	37
	Crawford	40,856	41
	Jackson	151,271	99
1876	Hayes	4,036,572	185 (winner)
	Tilden	4,282,020	184
1888	Harrison	5,443,892	233 (winner)
	Cleveland	5,534,488	168
2000	G. W. Bush	50,456,002	271 (winner)
	Gore	50,999,897	266
	Nader	2,882,955	0

EV

Document Analysis

1. What generalization can you make about these four presidential elections?
2. From your general knowledge of how the Electoral College system works, what government body finally elected John Quincy Adams president in 1824?
3. Explain how it is possible for a candidate like Hayes to lose the popular vote and win the election.
4. How could this document be used to argue that the Electoral College should be abolished?

